DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 102 SO 029 496

AUTHOR Fehn, Bruce; Flowers, Lamont; Jones, Elsie
TITLE "Why Is There So Much Hate in People's Hearts?": African-American Students Interpret the Integration Struggle in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Black History; *Black Students; *Black Studies; *Civil Rights; Equal Education; High Schools; Law Related Education; *Primary Sources; Racial Bias; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Little Rock School District AR

ABSTRACT

This study represents an attempt to address a gap in the research knowledge regarding how African Americans respond when provided an opportunity to interpret, analyze, and evaluate significant historical episodes in the struggle against race-based oppression and for racial equality. The study reports on what happened when a class of 16 African-American high school students interpreted the struggle to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. The study results, while tentative and preliminary, suggest African-American history powerfully sparked the interest and historical understanding of one class of African-American teenagers. The study was conducted with 16 subjects enrolled in an African-American history course at a large, urban high school in the midwest. Primary sources associated with the dramatic efforts to desegregate Central High School were presented to the students. The lesson plan employed in the study is provided in an appendix. (EH)

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"Why Is There So Much Hate in People's Hearts?": African-American Students Interpret the Integration Struggle in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957

Bruce Fehn*
College of Education
The University of Iowa

Lamont Flowers*
College of Education
The University of Iowa

Elsie Jones*
Joliet Township High School
Joliet, Illinois

SO 029 496

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Bruce Fehn coordinates the social studies education program at the University of Iowa. Lamont Flowers is a graduate student in social studies education at the University of Iowa. Elsie Jones received her M.A. in African-American history at the University of Iowa and teaches history at Joliet Township High School in Joliet, Illinois.

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"Why Is There So Much Hate in People's Hearts?":

African-American Students Interpret the Integration Struggle in

Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957

Eminent historians, including John Hope Franklin (1987), Leon Litwack (1996), and Darlene Clark Hine (1996), regard history as having transformative power for African Americans. In Leon Litwack's words, African-American history enables them to understand how the past "might be used both to explain and sustain their repression" (Litwack, 1996:21). Remarkably, however, no previous research has investigated how African Americans respond when provided an opportunity to interpret, analyze, and evaluate significant historical episodes in the struggle against race-based oppression and for racial equality.

This study represented an attempt to address this gap in research knowledge. It reports on what happened when a class of sixteen African-American high school students interpreted a significant event in the history of efforts to defeat racial injustice--the struggle in 1957 to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The study's results, while tentative and preliminary, suggest African-American history powerfully sparked the interest and historical understanding of one class of African-American teenagers.

Subjects

The study's sixteen subjects were enrolled in an African-American history course at a large, urban high school in the Midwest. All students in the course were African American and each agreed to participate in the study. Of the sixteen subjects, nine (56%) were sophomores, three (19%) were juniors and four (25%) were seniors. Students came from middle-class or economically disadvantaged households. Academically, participants had been tracked in the lower level.

Research Procedures

To assess how research participants responded to a significant event in African-American history, we presented to them primary sources associated with the dramatic effort to desegregate Little Rock's Central High School. We provide in Appendix I the lesson plan employed in the study. Below we provide a synopsis of events that took place in Little Rock in 1957.

Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957. On September 4, 1957, Arkansas governor Orval E. Faubus attempted to block implementation of a local plan to desegregate Central High School. The desegregation plan followed the pathbreaking 1954 United States Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. In the Brown decision, the court ruled that racially segregated educational facilities were "inherently unequal." Soon after the Brown decision, the Supreme Court ordered school desegregation to take place "with all deliberate speed." To prevent implementation of the Supreme Court's decision, Faubus dispatched Arkansas National Guard troops to block African-American students entry into Central High. The Guardsmen received "support" from a large crowd of whites determined to prevent the school's integration.

When Faubus capitulated to a Federal judge's court order to remove the Guardsmen, a white mob remained to intimidate the African-American students. Eight African-American students entered the school in face of hundreds of white segregationists who shouted racial slurs, spit and threw objects at them. Shortly thereafter, on September 24, 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent in a thousand paratroopers to ensure the students' safety.[1]

Implementing the lesson plan. To see how African Americans interpreted this signal event in recent African-American history, one of the authors of this report implemented in her own classroom a fifty minute lesson on the Little Rock incident. The plan was designed by another member of our research team (see Appendix). She initiated the plan by discussing with students an excerpt from Brown v. Topeka Board of Education.

Next, the teacher showed students three different primary sources accompanied by questions to guide students' reflections upon the material presented to them (see the Appendix questions accompanying the lesson plan).

First, she showed subjects film footage from the "Eyes on the Prize" documentary. It showed Arkansas National Guardsmen blocking entry into Central High and whites directing overt acts of racial hostility toward the African-American students.

Following the documentary footage, the teacher provided subjects with a political cartoon published in 1957. It showed a man labeled "school segregation" tripping over a "little rock," and slamming his chin onto the ground.

Lastly, the teacher directed students to examine a photograph of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the students who desegregated Central High. The photo showed Eckford followed by a crowd of menacing white segregationists.

To help focus students' thinking, the teacher asked them questions after presentation of each document. For example, following the documentary footage, the teacher asked students to "list two things this motion picture tells you about life in the United States in 1957." In addition, she asked "How does the information fit into or to your understanding of history?" and "What question(s) does the information from the video raise in your mind?" The teacher discussed as

well an almost identical set of questions with students regarding the political cartoon and photograph.

Following conversations about each primary source, the teacher discussed how historians attempt to reconstruct the past. The teacher helped students understand that historians use documents such as the "Eyes on the Prize" documentary footage and photographs of incidents at Little Rock to describe and explain "what happened" there in September, 1957. As a final exercise, the teacher instructed students to write "in their own words" an account of the Little Rock affair and use evidence from the documents they had just examined.

Results

While the results reported here are preliminary, we believe they strongly suggest that subjects' inquiries into a key event in African-American history sparked their interest and deepened their historical understanding. Analyses of subject responses showed that lesson plan exercises provoked subjects to: (1) interpret documents and use them to write accounts of "what happened" in Little Rock in 1957, (2) empathize with African Americans' struggles to attain equality, (3) recognize historical significance through connecting past events with contemporary situations, and (4) raise significant questions about race and racism in America. Each of these four kinds of subject responses (interpretation, empathy, assignment of historical significance, and question raising) represented aspects of historical cognition or understanding.

We provide below selected examples of each of these four response categories that subjects in the study provided in response to lesson plan activities.

Category 1: Subjects interpreted and used documents to reconstruct the past.

Interpretation. All students interpreted aspects of some or all of the documents. Below are two examples of students' interpretations of the Elizabeth Eckford photograph.

> The girl was frightened by the crowd but she would not show her fear.
>
> White females were also causing trouble for Blacks.

Historical reconstruction of "what happened." Below we provide one student's historical reconstruction of the event. Note that the subject employs material contained in the primary sources presented during the lesson plan.

> In the year 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas, will be remembered for the struggle of nine high school students to integrate Central High School, for how the Governor called out the troops to block the entrance of nine Black students, how local police allowed angry mobs to interrupt the lives of these kids, and for how the students had to have army escorts to be with them all day. Little Rock will be remembered as a stumbling block for integration.

Category 2: Empathy with African Americans' struggle for equality.

Researchers interested in historical understanding variously define the word "empathy." We accepted Ashby's and Lee's (1987) formulation that historical empathy involves "entertaining the beliefs, values and goals" of actors in the past in order to understand why they behaved as they did. The following are examples of how this study's participants displayed historical empathy.

> This is another example of the hatred and struggle that Blacks had to endure.
>
> It shows me how strong and brave Blacks had to be in order to survive.

Category 3: Recognizing historical significance through connecting the past with the present.

According to Peter Seixas (1994), historical events attain significance when "members of a contemporary community" connect the events to "other historical phenomena and ultimately themselves." The following examples reveal that subject participants located significance in the events that took place at Little Rock in 1957.

My elders had a tough life and now I understand why things are so bad now.

Today it appears that Blacks have fought for nothing because some Blacks do not choose to go to school.

There were some people who made a difference for our generation.

Category 4: Raising significant questions about race and racism in America.

In our view, subjects' questions posed in light of studying primary sources on the Little Rock episode tellingly revealed the power of offering African-American history to African-American students. This small sample of student questions indicate the material provoked meaningful questions about race and racism in American history.

Other than darker skin, what is so different about African Americans?

Will there ever be an answer to stop racism?

Why didn't Whites who thought segregation was wrong stand up to other Whites?

Why is there so much hate in people's hearts?

Discussion and Implications

The study shows that African-American history has power to engage and deepen African-American youngsters' historical understanding. Indeed, it implies that studying incidents at Little Rock had the impact hoped for by scholars of the African-American past--to understand the

repression of African Americans and the significance of struggles to defeat it. Further, The study's findings indicate that teachers should provide African Americans with historical episodes meaningful to their own lived experiences (Epstein, 1997). We conclude by noting future research should also address how Euro-American children respond to African-American history. After all, their White ancestors were involved fundamentally in shaping the contours of the African-American struggle for equality.

References

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Epstein, Terri. (1997). Sociocultural approaches to young people's historical understanding. Social Education, 61(1), 28-31.

Franklin, John Hope. (1887). On the evolution of scholarship in Afro-American history. In Darlene Clark Hine (Ed.), The state of Afro-American history: Past, present and future. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987.

Litwack, Leon. (1996). The making of a historian. In Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg (Eds.), Historians and race: Autobiography and the writing of history (pp. 15-32 ~~51-65~~). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Seixas, Peter. (1994). Students understanding of historical significance. Theory and Research in Social Education, 22(3), 281-304.

Appendix A

Topic: Little Rock, Arkansas (1957); 50 minute period

Purpose, Background, and Context

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to the incident that occurred in 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas. Through an analysis of this incident, students will become familiar with aspects of the African-American experience. Furthermore, students will explore relevant issues concerning prejudice and discrimination.

Procedures:

- Briefly discuss relevant facts concerning the issue of school desegregation in American public schools that occurred during the 1950's. Read an excerpt from the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka court decision that explains the intent and outcome of the case:

  Segregation of White and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of the child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the education and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.

- Distribute Handout I. Show students the segment of the Eyes on the Prize concerning Little Rock, Arkansas (1957). Ask students to respond to the questions on Handout I.

- Distribute Handout II. Display a cartoon that depicts the issue of school desegregation. Ask students to respond to the questions on Handout II.

- Distribute handout III. Display photograph of the Little Rock, Arkansas, incident. Have students study the photograph for 2 minutes. Ask students to respond to the questions on Handout III.

- Discuss the role of the historian. Distribute Handout IV. Ask students to assume the role of an historian and use the images shown today to write an historical account of Little Rock, Arkansas (1957).

- Collect Handouts I-IV. In whole class discussion, discuss the students' responses and reactions.

Materials:

- Television and VCR
- Excerpt from Brown v. Board of Education
- A cartoon that depicts the Little Rock, AR (1957) incident or integration
- Video Recording of Eyes on the Prize
- Photograph taken in Little Rock, Arkansas (1957)
- Handouts I-IV with questions.

Resources:

Chase, J. (1962). Today's Cartoons. New Orleans: The Hauser Press.

Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965. Alexandria: PBS Video, 1986.

Huckaby, E. (1980). Crisis at Central High: Little Rock 1957-58. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, p. 67.

Kluger, R. (1975). Simple Justice (Appendix: Text of the decisions: Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, pp. 779-787). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

National Standards for History (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). ISBN: 0-933218-5-4.

Percoco, J. Using Primary Sources: A Guide for Teachers and Parents. Washington, DC: Office of Public Programs, National Archives.

Handout I Eyes on the Prize: Little Rock, Arkansas (1957)

1. List two things this motion picture tells you about life in the United States in 1957.
2. How does the information from the video fit into or add to your understanding of history?
3. What question(s) does the information from the video raise in your mind?

Handout II Cartoon: School Desegregation

1. Describe the action taking place in the cartoon.
2. Explain the message(s) of the cartoon.
3. How does the information in the cartoon fit into or add to your understanding of history?
4. what question(s) does the cartoon raise in your mind?

Handout III Photograph(s) of the Little Rock, Arkansas, Incident

1. Based on what you have observed from the photograph, list three things you might conclude from looking at this photograph?
2. How does the information from the photograph fit into or add to your understanding of history?
3. What question(s) does this photograph raise in your mind.

Handout IV In Your Own Words

1. For a nice synopsis of the Little Rock crisis and an excellent lesson plan on it see John Vernon, Wynell Schamel and Lee Ann Potter, "Jackie Robinson, President Eisenhower and the Little Rock Crisis." Social education 61(4), April/May 1997, pp. 218-222.